

JIM C – QUIZ OF THE WEEK

MONDAY – 11/10/08

Washington pundits and the general public finally agree – the election of Barack Obama is historic, a time of sea change.

HOW DID THE TERM “*SEA CHANGE*” ORIGINATE?

***Definition:* A profound change or transformation in the nature of something. The phrase is from Ariel’s wonderfully evocative song in *The Tempest (1610)*, where Shakespeare illustrates the original sense of the term and its remarkable and eerie beauty:**

***“Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his bones are coral made
Those are pearls that were his eyes / Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.”***

By “*sea change*” (which has lately lost its hyphen in common usage) Shakespeare meant a radical, fundamental transformation, metaphorically similar to the change wrought by prolonged submersion under water. The point at which it stopped being a direct quotation and turned into an idiom is uncertain, though it seems to have happened only in the latter part of the 19th century.

Therefore, pundits and commentators who think “*sea change*” has something to do with the ebb and flow of the tide, and use it for a minor or recurrent shift in policy or opinion, are doing a grave injustice to one of the most evocative phrases in our language.

Zen: For a nation or individual, a sea change is a very rare event